Program Notes

PRE-CONCERT RECITAL

Stars and Stripes Forever for Two Violins
JOHN PHILIP SOUSA
(ARR. BRUCE DUKOV)
Born: 1854
Died: 1932
Composed: 1896 (arranged 2016)

The Stars and Stripes Forever needs no introduction—it may be the most famous march ever written. Sousa wrote it in 1896 during the days of emerging American nationalism just before the war with Spain. The idea for this march occurred to Sousa while he was on a liner crossing the Atlantic. He did not have any music-paper with him, so he composed the march entirely in his head: "I did not transfer a note of that music to paper while I was on the steamer, but when we reached shore I set down the measures that my brain-band had been playing. Not a note of it has ever changed." The Stars and Stripes Forever was a success from its first performance in 1896. The following year, a Philadelphia newspaper offered a review that nicely catches the spirit of this music, describing it as "stirring enough to rouse the American eagle from his crag, and set him to shriek exultantly."

This concert offers The Stars and Stripes Forever in an arrangement for two violins by the American violinist Bruce Dukov, who studied with Dorothy Delay at Juilliard and later became concertmaster of the Hollywood Bowl Symphony. The key to this dazzling arrangement lies in its subtitle: "In the virtuoso style of Wieniawski." Polish violinist Henryk Wieniawski (1835-1880) was one of the great violinists of the nineteenth century, famed not only for his original compositions like the Scherzo-Tarantelle but also for the many pieces in which he used familiar melodies by other composers as the starting point for his own considerable virtuosity. It is in the latter manner that Dukov made his arrangement of The Stars and Stripes Forever, for it demands that two absolutely first-class violinists master its many challenges, which include complex double-stopping, fingered octaves, artificial harmonics, quick exchanges between the two violinists, and many more. Dukov's arrangement gives us some sense of what Wieniawski might have done with Sousa's sturdy march.

For the two violinists, this is music of hair-raising difficulty, but for the rest of us, it's lots of fun.

Duo for Violin and Viola in B-flat Major, K. 424
WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
Born: 1756
Died: 1791
Composed: 1783

I. Adagio — Allegro
II. Andante cantabile
III. Tema con variazione

The story of the composition of Mozart's two duos for violin and viola has become part of the legend. On his first trip back to Salzburg after the bitter parting from Archbishop Colloredo, Mozart discovered his old friend Michael Haydn sick and suspended without pay for failing to complete a set of duos for the archbishop. Mozart rushed home and dashed off these two duos (overnight, as the story has it) so that they might be published under Haydn's name and get the latter's salary resumed. This story has been told often to point out Mozart's many virtues: his loyalty, his generosity, his ability to compose at lightning speed, his capacity to outwit the archbishop yet one more time.

The only problem with the story is that it probably isn't true. Mozart did write these duos during the summer of 1783, and Michael Haydn was ill that summer, but this legend—first told by two of the latter's students—has scant supporting evidence and seems a little too good to be true, a little too neatly conceived to make—one more time—Mozart the hero and the archbishop the villain.
In any case, these two duos are impressive music. Mozart played both violin and viola (he preferred viola), and the writing for the two instruments is wonderful—graceful and beautifully suited to the strengths of each. Instead of relegating the viola to a mere supporting or harmonic role, Mozart makes it a true melodic partner and equal of the violin, which in turn is given a brilliant part, often written in an unusually high range.

The Duo in B-flat Major is in three substantial movements. The first opens with a slow introduction; some have felt that the dotted rhythms and portentous manner here are a send-up of weighty symphonic introductions, but the music remains too appealing to be satiric. The Allegro flies along gracefully, with some surprising syncopations and excursions into minor keys. Mozart offers opportunities for repeats of both exposition and development, so this movement can be quite long if both are taken. The writing for violin over the final moments is impressive—Mozart gives it a series of runs, turns, and trills, and sends it rocketing up to a high B-flat.

The Andante cantabile, in E-flat Major and set in a flowing 6/8 meter, does in fact sing throughout. In the closing measures, Mozart brings the music to a halt and puts two fermatas in the same measure; his intention is clear: each performer has the chance to perform their own brief cadenza. The animated Andante grazioso is a variation movement. Mozart offers an eight-measure theme—encrusted with grace-notes—followed by six variations and a coda marked Allegro.

CONCERT

String Quartet in E-flat Major, Op. 14 (after Piano Sonata Op. 14 No. 1)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770
Died: 1827
Composed: 1798–1799

I. Allegro moderato
II. Allegretto
III. Rondo. Allegro comodo

This piece is a curiosity—it is Beethoven's own arrangement of one of his piano sonatas for string quartet. Let's begin with the piano sonata.

Beethoven turned 29 on December 16, 1799, and over the next few days three of his piano sonatas were published in Vienna. On December 18 Hoffmeister brought out his Sonata in C minor, Opus 13, better known to us under the nickname Pathétique. Three days after that, Mollo published the two sonatas that make his Opus 14. The exact date of composition of these sonatas remains uncertain—all appear to have been written over the previous several years—but these two opus numbers could not be more unlike. The Pathétique is one of the finest early examples of Beethoven in his "C-minor mood"—a dramatic and explosive sonata, tautly conceived across the span of its three movements—but the two sonatas of Opus 14 seem to be from the pen of a different composer: both are in major keys, both are much shorter than the Pathétique, and both ride easily along a relaxed, almost comfortable manner.

The first of them, the Sonata in E Major, is an exceptionally calm sonata, far different from the conflict that drives some of Beethoven's more famous works in this form. The opening Allegro is remarkable for its clarity—almost delicacy—and its dynamic often remains at piano. Matters grow more animated at the development before the reprise of the opening material and the pianissimo close. The Allegretto feels chorale-like in its sustained four-part harmony, though Beethoven lightens matters in the trio; once again, this movement ends pianissimo. The finale is the expected rondo, and Beethoven's marking is worth noting: this movement is marked both Allegro and comodo ("leisurely, comfortable"). Beethoven breaks the easy flow of the rondo theme with an extended episode in triplets and later a sharply-syncopated interlude. At the end, the relaxed opening mood reasserts itself, and the sonata comes to a poised conclusion.

In 1801, three years after its publication as a piano sonata, Beethoven arranged this sonata for string quartet, transposing up a step it to F Major to make it more suitable for stringed instruments. Beethoven did not like making this arrangement, believing that music conceived for piano does not translate easily into string music, and in fact the most successful part of the transcription for strings is the slow movement, where the four-part writing works idiomatically for string quartet. This quartet version is rarely played today, so this performance brings the almost unique opportunity to hear it. Beethoven refused all subsequent requests to transpose other sonatas for string quartet.

Serenade in C Major, Op. 10
ERNŐ DOHNÁNYI

Born: 1877
Died: 1960
Composed: 1902

I. Marcia. Allegro
II. Romanza. Adagio non troppo quasi andante
III. Scherzo. Vivace
IV. Tema con variazioni. Andante con moto
V. Rondo. Allegro vivace

Music for string trio—violin, viola, and cello—is rare. Taking one violin away from the string quartet presents the composer with a number of problems, especially with harmony, and it is no surprise that composers have shied away from the complex challenges of such a combination of instruments. Late in his brief life Mozart wrote one great string trio, Beethoven wrote five as a young man but never came back to the form, Schubert experimented with two brief trios. In the twentieth century, Hindemith wrote two and Schoenberg one, but the form remains rare.

Dohnányi's Serenade for Violin, Viola, and Cello dates from 1902, when the 25-year-old composer was touring the world as a virtuoso pianist. Dohnányi did not play a string instrument, which makes the beautifully idiomatic writing for strings in his Serenade all the more remarkable. He balances the three instruments carefully, emphasizes their lyric possibilities, and achieves harmonic interest in a variety of ways, often using the pizzicato cello as a foundation for the two higher voices.

Dohnányi called this five-movement work a Serenade. That term originally was used solely for vocal music, but by Mozart's time it had come to refer to lighter instrumental music intended for enjoyment or diversion, and it is in this sense that Dohnányi employs the term. Such a title should not keep us from taking this music seriously. Good-spirited and carefully crafted, the Serenade has become one of Dohnányi's most popular works.

The brief opening movement is a stirring march, propelled along its way by the dotted figures that give the main theme its energy. Its trio section belongs to the cello before a very brief reprise of the opening march. A lovely viola cantilena opens the Romanza, and here the soaring violin dominates the middle section; the return of the opening material—with violin and viola singing above pizzicato cello accompaniment—is especially effective. The Scherzo is a fugue with the three voices making swirling entrances and the music pressing forward constantly. A lyric trio section gives way to the return of the fugue, which now uses the trio theme as a countermelody.

Longest of the five movements, the Andante con moto is a set of variations. The wistful main theme is heard immediately, followed by five brief variations, all within the subdued character of the theme. The buoyant Finale is a rondo, based on its energetic opening theme. Near the close, themes from the opening Marcia are briefly reprised before the single concluding chord.

String Quartet No. 12 in F Major, Op. 96, B. 179, "American"
ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born: 1841
Died: 1904
Composed: 1893

I. Allegro ma non troppo
II. Lento
III. Molto vivace
IV. Finale. Vivace ma non troppo

During his three-year tenure as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York (1892-95), Dvořák was fascinated by life in the New World, but he missed his family—four of his six children had remained in Bohemia—and his homeland. Dvořák's secretary in New York City was a young violinist named Josef Jan Kovařík, who had grown up in the Czech community of Spillville, Iowa. Kovařík invited Dvořák to spend the summer of 1893 in Spillville, and the composer gladly accepted. There, with his wife (and now all his children), Dvořák spent a happy and productive summer, surrounded by familiar language, customs, and food. He was amazed by Iowa's vast prairies and forests, he played the organ in the Spillville church, he heard native birds, and he watched as local Indians came into the village to sell herbs and dance.

Dvořák also composed that summer. He sketched the String Quartet in F Major in only three days (June 8-10, 1893) and had it complete in fifteen.

Dvořák's comment was concise: "Thank God. It went quickly. I am satisfied." Early audiences were more than satisfied. The Kneisel Quartet gave the official premiere in Boston on January 1, 1894, and performed it fifty times over the next several seasons. The quartet quickly acquired the nickname "American." The source of that nickname is uncertain, but it has become an inescapable part of how we think of this music, and nationalistic Americans were quick to claim that here at last was an authentic American classical music based on American materials. Dvořák would have none of that. He would later denounce any "nonsense about my having made use of original American melodies. I have only composed in the spirit of such American national melodies." He himself offered a useful introduction to his quartet: "When I wrote this quartet in the Czech community of Spillville in 1893, I wanted to write something for once that was very melodious and straightforward, and dear Papa Haydn kept appearing before my eyes, and that is why it all turned out so simply. And it's good that it did."

Part of the charm of this quartet is precisely that it did turn "out so simply" and that it is so "melodious and straightforward." The Quartet in F Major is full of instantly memorable tunes and boundless energy, and its sunny surface is seldom clouded by harmonic or textural complexities. One might not readily identify "Papa Haydn" as the father of this quartet, but that older master's cheerful spirits and sophisticated writing for strings are very much part of this music.

It is the viola that leads the way into the opening of the Allegro ma non troppo, and that sharply inflected, rising-and-falling theme will give shape to much of the material that follows. A songful second subject in the violin has a rhythmic snap that some have felt to be American in origin, though such a snap is typical of the folk music of many lands. The development concludes with a brief fugal passage derived from the opening viola melody.

Many regard the Lento as the finest movement in the quartet—and one of the finest slow movements Dvořák ever composed. It is virtually a continuous flow of melody, as the violin's lamenting theme—marked molto espressivo—sings hauntingly over undulating accompaniment. At the close the cello takes up this theme as the other instruments alternate pizzicato and bowed accompaniment. The scherzo rips along cheerfully, its main theme sharing the rhythm of the quartet's opening theme. About twenty measures into this movement, Dvořák gives the first violin a melody he heard a bird singing outside his window in Spillville (this bird was long identified as the scarlet tanager, though recent research suggests that it may have been the red-eyed vireo). The scherzo alternates this cheerful opening section with interludes that are minor-key variants of its opening theme.

The most impressive thing about the rondo-finale, marked Vivace ma non troppo, is its rhythmic energy, in both the themes themselves and the accompanying voices. The rondo theme, introduced immediately by the first violin, is one of those sparkling melodies that are impossible to forget. The central episode in this rondo is a quiet chorale, and some have heard it as a reminiscence of Dvořák's experience of playing the tiny organ in the church at Spillville. Some of this movement's interludes recall the shape of themes from earlier movements, and the blazing rush to the close is one of the most exhilarating Dvořák ever wrote.

Many have been quick to argue against the notion that there is anything distinctly "American" about this quartet, claiming instead that it is music composed by a thoroughly Bohemian composer while on vacation in this country. And perhaps they are right. But do we hear the influence of spirituals in the long, plaintive violin melody in the Lento? The rhythms of Indian drums in some of the accompaniment figures of the quartet's outer movements? The song of an American bird in the scherzo? The gentle remembrance of a church organ in the finale?

Listeners may decide for themselves whether the nickname "American" is fitting for this quartet.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger.